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Supporting Adolescent Readers

An Introduction to the Academic Literacy Course and the Reading Apprenticeship Framework

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In the current era of high-stakes testing, conversations about the challenge of improving literacy for middle school and high school youth have become increasingly urgent. The Strategic Literacy Initiative (SLI) of WestEd has been working with communities of middle school and high school subject-area teachers since 1995 to develop new ways to address this complex challenge. Many of the teachers, administrators, and policymakers with whom we discuss the need to improve literacy skills are concerned, as we are, with educational equity and access. A disproportionately high number of African American and Latino adolescents are not receiving the kind of support they need to realize their potential as citizens with a wide repertoire of literacy skills. The vast majority of African American and Latino students who are identified as "struggling readers" are able to decode (sound out) words but struggle to comprehend the broad range of texts they will need to understand in today's information-driven world. Instead of being challenged and strategically supported to build on their existing knowledge resources, they are often consigned to remedial reading classes, which do little to engage their intelligence. This perpetuates an academic achievement gap, limiting too many young people's opportunities and diminishing the contributions they will be able to make to our evolving national and global community.[1]

In spite of recently increased efforts to improve reading outcomes for low-performing students, a pressing question remains: *How can we help students who see themselves as nonreaders, who may be alienated from school and school reading in general, become willing and able readers of a variety of academic texts?*

The work described in the following chapters, situated in classrooms of teachers participating in communities convened and supported by the SLI, addresses this question by starting with the idea that a sense of self-confidence, self-awareness, and an identity as a reader are necessary preconditions for increasing students' capacity to read and respond to academic texts.[2]

An Anthology for Reading Apprenticeship, for which this book is a companion volume, offers students a rich set of reading resources for reexamining their reading identities in relation to a wide world of readers from other times and places. Readings in the four interrelated themes of *An Anthology for Reading Apprenticeship*—Literacy and Identity, Literacy and Power, How We Read, and Breaking Codes—give students a chance to become more curious about and aware of the differences and similarities in reading experiences across a range of readers, to see reading as a social activity with social implications, to examine their assumptions about reading, and to expand their understandings of the varied kinds of reading that different types of texts require.

Reading, talking, and writing about the reading lives of people from a wide cultural and historical spectrum and grappling with the different kinds of language and thought in varied types of texts can be powerful not only for students who do not see themselves as readers of academic texts, but also for more academically oriented students. Explorations into the themes in *An Anthology for Reading Apprenticeship* can provide opportunities for all students to learn to access more difficult texts, challenge themselves to read more critically, and begin to become the kinds of readers colleges and universities expect.

Working to build academic literacy means going beyond helping students learn to pick out main ideas from topic or ending sen-

tences or learning to do a passable summary of a selection of expository text on a high school exit exam. The kinds of reading and writing required for the challenges of college, technical school, work, and civic life and for advanced achievement on the National Educational Assessment Program (NAEP) tests, begin with the active engagement of the reader. At the advanced level, as NAEP defines it, readers are constructing new understandings by interacting within and across texts, summarizing, analyzing, and evaluating. They are using literacy for creative and critical thinking and for problem solving.[3]

The more that readers are able to draw on everything they know as they read and write, the more meaning they are able to make of texts they encounter. As students learn to engage with texts and learn new ways to identify and solve comprehension problems they encounter while they read, their independence and range as readers increase exponentially. They begin to become more active readers too. Students who have never before read an entire book finish their first book; students who have felt that their science or social studies textbooks are "too boring" or "too hard" learn to pay attention to "what goes on in your mind while you are reading" and to visualize, summarize, predict, and make connections to what they read. As students engage more fully, the texts seem to change for them: they start to see that "these people in the history book were *real*. . . . These things *really happened*!" or that "the science book just seems more interesting now." Students who have felt overwhelmed by academic reading begin to understand that reading is problem solving; they start to see that they can work at solving comprehension problems in the types of challenging academic texts that function as gatekeepers in relation to further education and opportunity.

Building academic literacy means building the ability to read critically with reference to other texts and world knowledge, to understand a given text in the broader context of its genre and discipline, and to be able to interpret and apply understanding from the reading. Readers must learn to bridge from what they already know

to what is new for them. Building the kinds of confident, critical, and creative academic literacy we envision for students—especially for students who have already labeled themselves or been labeled as "nonreaders"—requires that teachers find explicit and structured ways of raising students' awareness of their reading habits and identities. They must support students as they learn to meet new, rigorous, and interesting literacy challenges. In the vision of academic literacy we hold, motivation and engagement are not ends in themselves. Rather, they constitute the crucial foundation for students' further development as readers and learners.

Academic literacy—the ability to comprehend and read and write critically in a range of academic disciplines—can and should be developed in the context of subject-area classrooms. The bulk of our work with teams of middle school and high school teachers in the San Francisco Bay Area and around the country through National Institutes on Reading Apprenticeship is rooted in the goal of building academic literacy within subject-area classes. Teaching reading in history *is* teaching history, involving explicit modeling and guided practice in reading for point of view, bias, key ideas, and connections to other historical concepts and themes previously discussed and to one's own world knowledge from multiple sources. Similarly, teaching reading in science, mathematics, and literature classes can help students learn the ways of thinking that are valued in these disciplines. In helping students to become more active and engaged readers, pioneering social studies, science, math, and English teachers who are working with the Reading Apprenticeship instructional framework are finding that when they set up a strong personal and social foundation for reading in their disciplines, students are more likely to meet or exceed the cognitive and knowledge development goals they have for them.

Lessons from Reading Apprenticeship Classrooms builds on the conceptual foundation described in *Reading for Understanding: A Guide to Improving Reading in Middle and High School Classrooms*. The rest of this chapter provides a summary of the goals and design of the

pilot Academic Literacy course and the Reading Apprenticeship framework introduced in that book, which informs the work described in the following chapters.

The Academic Literacy Course

The Academic Literacy course began in the fall of 1996 as a mandatory course for all incoming ninth graders at Thurgood Marshall Academic High School, a school serving the poorest neighborhoods of San Francisco and established by court decree to provide a college preparatory education for the Latino and African American students who had been historically deprived of such educational opportunities. According to school reports, the 1996–1997 ninth grade at Thurgood Marshall was approximately 30 percent African American, 25 percent Latino, 24 percent Chinese American, 7 percent Filipino, and 8 percent other nonwhite students. Only 3 percent of the students were white. Approximately 7 percent of the ninth-grade students were classified as special education students eligible for support services, and 14 percent were identified as English-language learners.

The school had opened in 1994 with many recent high school reforms in place, including block scheduling, family groupings of students with academic core faculty, and project-based, interdisciplinary teaching and learning. Twelve sections of Academic Literacy met for two ninety-minute block periods and one fifty-minute period per week. Christine Cziko, a veteran English teacher, codesigner, and lead teacher of the course, recruited three other teachers to teach this course, among them a first-year English teacher and two history teachers.

Academic Literacy had three goals: to increase students' engagement, fluency, and competency in reading. The course had a metacognitive and meta-affective focus, placing adolescent students in control of their own engagement and reading practices.[4] Students in the course were invited into an inquiry through a set of essential

questions that the course was designed to explore: "What is reading?" "What do proficient readers do when they read?" Students were to gain a greater awareness of their reading and to come to understand their own reading practices and habits: "What are my characteristics as a reader?" "What strategies do I use as I read?" The course was also designed to increase student motivation for reading by revealing, within the students' framework of reference, the power of literacy to shape lives. The students explored questions such as, "What roles does reading serve in people's personal and public lives?" leading to a clearer understanding of the role reading will play in their future educational and career goals and goals they can set and work toward to help themselves develop as readers. Finally, the course had a meta-discourse focus, exploring how texts are designed and conventionally structured through such questions as, "What kind of language is characteristic of this kind of text?" "What does this language and structure demand of the reader?" Students encountered and revisited these questions through a series of units and activities designed to engage them in ideas, strategies, and practices to demystify discipline-based reading and apprentice them as academic readers.

Three units were designed to focus on the role and use of reading in one's personal and public world: Reading Self and Society, Reading Media, and Reading History. Two years later, a fourth unit, Reading Science and Technology, was created. Within these units, specific subject areas provided what we hoped would be compelling content, as well as sites for integration of reading strategies and practices. (See Appendix A for an overview of these four units.)

Throughout the four units of Academic Literacy, teachers modeled and guided students in key instructional strategies. These included sustained silent reading (SSR), reciprocal teaching (RT), and explicit, integrated instruction in self-monitoring, cognitive strategies, and text analysis that would facilitate reading a variety of materials.

In the first unit of the course, Academic Literacy teachers engaged students in practicing the component strategies of RT (questioning, summarizing, clarifying, and predicting) as they read a variety of texts and conducted inquiries into reading. Students were also given specific instruction, as well as modeling and thinking-aloud opportunities, as they examined the features of different text genres. They learned and practiced techniques for note taking, paraphrasing, and using graphic organizers and mapping to identify text structure and support processing of information in texts; identifying root words, prefixes, and suffixes; and developing semantic networks. All strategy and text instruction was embedded in units of subject-area study and the reading of a variety of texts. Critically, the overarching goal of putting students in control of their own engagement in and assessment of these strategies for themselves as readers ran through these instructional routines. Through the shared inquiry into reading, students were encouraged to reappraise their own conceptions of literacy, set and accomplish personal goals for reading development, and draw on the social resources of the classroom community in developing new and more powerful reading repertoires.

Impact of Academic Literacy on Student Reading

SLI's research team, led by Cynthia Greenleaf, worked with the pilot Academic Literacy teachers at Marshall to collect a variety of data, including standardized test scores and qualitative data to gauge student thinking and learning. Standardized measures included pre- and posttests of reading proficiency using the Degrees of Reading Power (DRP) test. Qualitative measures included pre- and post-course reading surveys adapted from Nanci Atwell (Appendix E), as well as student written reflections, self-assessments, and course evaluations; focus group interviews; classroom observations; and samples of course work for thirty students selected randomly from the class rosters of the two of the Academic Literacy teachers.

Student Performance on Standardized Reading Comprehension Tests

Academic Literacy students improved their performance significantly on the DRP test, moving from the forty-seventh to nearly the forty-ninth percentile in national ranking in the seven months of instructional time between October and May of their ninth-grade year.[5] The DRP test is both norm and criterion referenced. In comparison with the national norm, the ninth graders in Academic Literacy classes started the year reading on average at a late seventh-grade level, moving to a late ninth-grade level (catching up to the national norm for ninth graders) by May. In terms of familiar texts, by the test makers' estimate, students were able independently to read and comprehend texts similar in difficulty to *Charlotte's Web, Old Yeller,* and children's magazines at the start of the year. By May, the test makers estimate they were able to independently read and comprehend texts similar in difficulty to *To Kill a Mockingbird, The Adventures of Tom Sawyer,* and teen reading materials. The increase of nearly 4 units on the DRP criterion-referenced scale from fall to spring is significantly greater than the norm, based on samples of large, national populations of same-grade students. These students' increased average reading levels in May, as estimated by the DRP, suggested that they should be able to handle all but the most difficult high school textbooks with instructional support and that with instructional support, these students should be able to tackle difficult literature like *The Prince* and *The Scarlet Letter.*

Student Responses to Reading Surveys

In addition to the standardized test results, the surveys also tell an aggregate story of students' changed reading habits. For example, students nearly doubled the average number of books they reported reading in the previous twelve months (from 5.58 in fall to 10.99 in spring). The surveys and students' writing also provided more individual glimpses of the impact of the Academic Literacy course

for students. After reading his pre- and postsurveys, one student wrote in a reflective letter to his teacher, "Before I didn't consider myself a good reader but now I do. I think that my attitude about reading has changed a lot 'cause since we started reading I got used to it. Now I feel more confident as a reader." In a similar testimony to this changed relationship to reading, a ninth-grade girl wrote, "I've learned this month that I've really started reading very good [*sic*]. I've done it so much that it's become a custom. I took both of my books everywhere I went. I even took them to Great America with me and read in the lines to get on rides."

The development of the Academic Literacy course took place in the context of a larger two-year teacher-researcher collaboration convened by SLI staff. This collaboration had the goal of creating novel and practical solutions to the complex problem of supporting students' reading in subject-area classrooms. Toward that goal, this teacher-research group worked to synthesize the broad field of reading research, to carry out videotaped and text-based case studies on a set of thirty ninth-grade students, and to find ways to apply research findings to the particular literacy learning and developmental needs of these (and similar) adolescents. As we advanced this program of research-in-practice, we were developing Reading Apprenticeship, a theoretically grounded instructional framework to guide teachers working across a range of disciplines and across a range of student populations.

The Reading Apprenticeship Framework

The Reading Apprenticeship framework, described fully in *Reading for Understanding,* is more than an instructional add-on or additional curriculum. It is, rather, an instructional framework that teachers embed in the process of teaching subject-area content. Its goal is to help students become more active, strategic, and independent readers by (1) supporting students' discovery of their own reasons to read and ways of reading, (2) modeling disciplinary ways

of reading in different subject areas and genres, and (3) guiding students to explore, strengthen, and assess their own reading.

Reading Apprenticeship is at heart a partnership of expertise, drawing on what teachers know and do as readers in their disciplines and on adolescents' unique and often underestimated strengths as learners. It helps students become better readers in the following ways:

- Engaging students in more reading
- Making the teacher's discipline-based reading processes and knowledge visible to students
- Making the students' reading processes, knowledge, and understandings visible to the teacher and to one another
- Helping students gain insight into their own reading processes as a means of gaining strategic control over these processes
- Helping students acquire a repertoire of problem-solving strategies for deepening comprehension of texts in various academic disciplines

In a Reading Apprenticeship classroom, the curriculum includes how we read and why we read in the ways we do, as well as what we read in subject matter classes. The Reading Apprenticeship framework, set out in Figure 1.1, involves teachers in orchestrating and integrating four interacting dimensions of classroom life that support reading development: the social, personal, cognitive, and knowledge-building dimensions. These dimensions are woven into subject-area teaching through *metacognitive conversations*, that is, investigations into the thinking processes that students and teachers employ as they read.

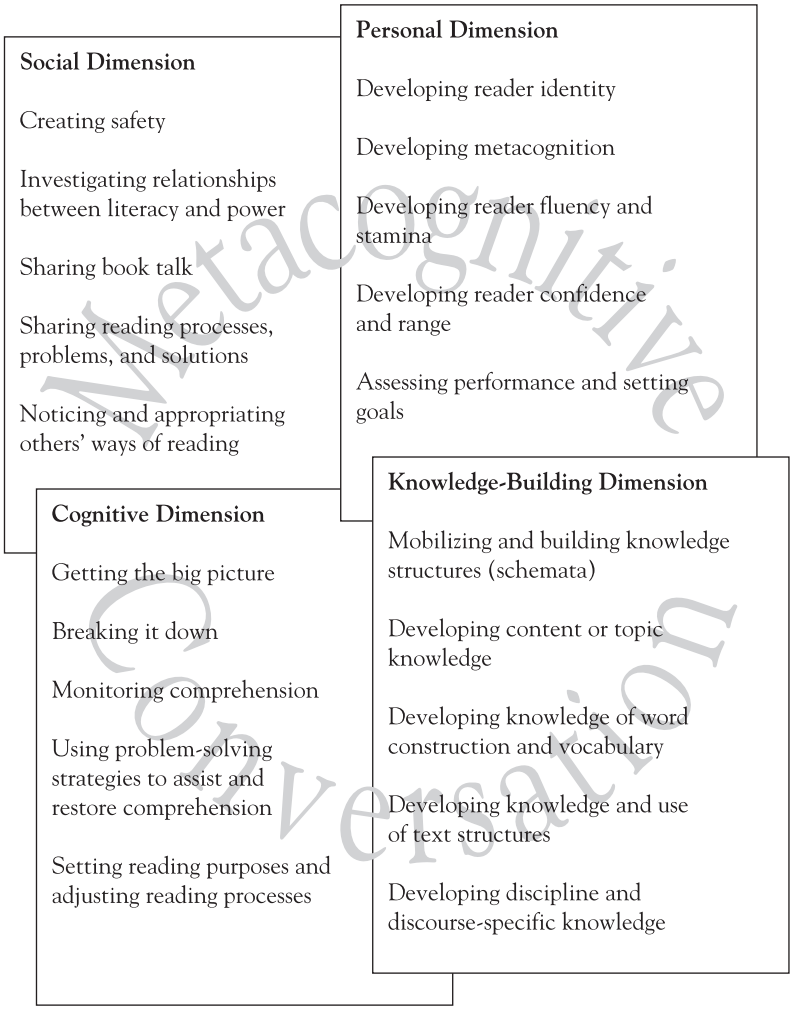

Figure 1.1. Dimensions of Reading Apprenticeship

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The Social Dimension: Building a Reading Inquiry Community

The social dimension in the Reading Apprenticeship framework involves developing a sense of safety in the classroom community and making good use of adolescents' interests in peer interactions. As students share confusions and difficulties with texts as well as understandings and ways of solving comprehension problems, they build both content knowledge and a repertoire of reading strategies.

The Personal Dimension: Creating a Sense of Agency

The personal dimension in the Reading Apprenticeship framework involves addressing adolescents' interest in exploring new aspects of their own identities and self-awareness as readers. In this dimension of the framework, students are encouraged to use the strategic skills they use in out-of-school settings to support their ability to be more strategic and purposeful about their reading.

The Cognitive Dimension: Developing a Comprehension Toolkit

The cognitive dimension in the Reading Apprenticeship framework involves developing students' repertoire of specific comprehension and problem-solving strategies, with an emphasis on group discussion of when and why particular cognitive strategies are useful.

The Knowledge-Building Dimension: Accessing and Extending Knowledge

The knowledge-building dimension involves identifying and expanding the knowledge students bring to a text. This includes knowledge about topics and content, text structure, word level knowledge, and discourse patterns and signals—the particular ways ideas are organized and expressed in various different disciplines and genres within each discipline.

Metacognitive Conversation

In Reading Apprenticeship classrooms, the social, personal, cognitive, and knowledge-building dimensions of classroom life are

woven into subject-area teaching through ongoing conversation about ways of reading and thinking in that particular discipline. As they engage in conversations about the concepts embedded in reading selections, teachers and students discuss their personal relationships to reading in the discipline, the cognitive strategies they use to solve comprehension problems, the structure and language of particular types of texts, and the kinds of knowledge required to make sense of reading materials in that subject area.

Lessons from Reading Apprenticeship Classrooms: Common Threads

The following four chapters present high school and middle school settings in which teachers are integrating the Reading Apprenticeship framework into their classrooms. Although the ways in which teachers embed the core elements of the framework in their curriculum and work with their students differ, readers may notice common threads that run throughout these classroom narratives.

Metacognitive Conversation

These four chapters all offer images and voices from classrooms illustrating what we describe as metacognitive conversation—conversation that helps students become more aware of the ways they and others process text and of the connections they make to texts. These metacognitive conversations help students learn to manage their attention and interest and to flexibly employ a variety of strategies for refocusing their attention and for solving comprehension problems. In Daniel Moulthrop's ninth-grade English class, for example, we see students in a reciprocal teaching group pausing at the end of each page "to make sure everyone understands what's happening and to share their questions and ideas." In Lisa Messina and Elizabeth Baker's classrooms, we see teachers sharing stories from their own reading histories and listening to students as they talk honestly about what they hate about reading. In Carolyn

Orta's classroom narrative, we hear joking and groans from her sixth-grade students as they chant the oft-repeated "If you're not comprehending, you're not reading!" in preparation for reading a new poem years beyond their grade level. In Amy Smith's classroom, we hear teacher and students sharing their confusions with the texts they read, as the teacher models strategies for solving comprehension problems in a social studies text.

Student Agency

In addition to the common thread of metacognitive conversation across these classrooms, we also see a shared focus on what we describe as students' *agency*—their increasing capacity and willingness to take responsibility for their own learning. By creating classroom environments in which conversations about how and why and in what particular ways we read different texts, these teachers are helping students build "a self-extending system of literacy expertise."[6]

Amy Smith, in describing what appealed to her in the Reading Apprenticeship framework, refers to "the program's support and encouragement of students' taking responsibility for their own learning." In Daniel Moulthrop's classroom, as students learn to take the varied discussion leader roles in reciprocal teaching groups, we see another picture of students' increasing agency and engagement in managing their own comprehension of texts. Students in Lisa Messina and Elizabeth Baker's Academic Literacy classrooms gain independence as they learn to choose, finish, and write about their sustained silent reading books.

Explicit Teaching of Comprehension Strategies in the Context of Meaningful Texts

Providing explicit teaching of comprehension strategies in the context of meaningful texts is another common thread across these classrooms. Carolyn Orta observes, "Teaching reading comprehension is more effective when students apply what they learn to the content materials that they are expected to read and understand."

Lisa Messina and Elizabeth Baker's three-year journey in developing their school's Academic Literacy course underscores the need for teaching reading comprehension strategies in the context of authentic subject-area texts—not only textbooks, but a wide range of texts of science, history, literacy, or mathematics that students at advanced levels of academic literacy need to be able to comprehend, apply, and critique.

Practicing "Smart Routines" to Scaffold Literacy Performance

Another common thread running through the classrooms narratives is the power of "generative" or "smart" routines—routines that students and teachers use regularly that provide practice in high-leverage reading and thinking behaviors and have the capacity to deepen students' understanding over time. Teachers across these chapters are scaffolding students' learning, providing models and guided practice, adding variety, and thinking carefully about pacing and eventual fading of expert support. They work to provide just enough support and just long enough so that progress is constant. Lisa Messina and Elizabeth Baker illustrate this in the way they provide students with increasingly sophisticated prompts over the year as they ask students to write in their sustained silent reading logs. The modeling, discussion, and practice they provide as they introduce each new prompt helps their students develop new abilities while engaging in a familiar routine.

All four of these teacher-authored chapters illustrate the varied ways teachers are incorporating the Reading Apprenticeship framework into their different instructional contexts, increasing their support for students' academic literacy. We invite your exploration of their classroom experiences as inspiration for your own.